

IF WOMEN WERE FIFTY PERCENT OF OUR LEADERS: AN OVERVIEW

If women constituted fifty percent of the leaders of our nation, and our organisations, what could we anticipate? Is women's increased leadership role a necessary condition for sustainable development?

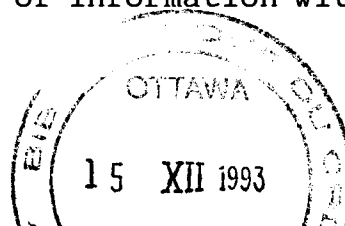
On the same day that Canada elected its first woman Prime Minister, Turkey did the same. In modern history men have dominated the arena of political power and leadership, and their values and perspectives have shaped the rules of the game. Many have argued, however, that women's strengths are most often viewed as weaknesses in this climate and a single female leader among a leadership corps that is predominantly male has to shed many of the qualities and perspectives that she would normally bring to leadership as a woman, in order to gain acceptance from her male colleagues. In fact in order to gain acceptability she more often has to prove that she is 'tougher' than the men. The few past female heads of state would seem to bear this out. It has been recommended for the United Nations that women should constitute at least one third and ideally fifty percent of top leadership if women's perspectives are to make a difference and sustainable development become a reality.

What would be the likely scenario if women leaders were not an isolated few, but were an equal half of the team in setting policy direction? Have we fuelled the crisis of unsustainable development that the world is now facing by having such a lack of gender balance in the leadership of our institutions nationally and globally? In the United States Congress, although still very much a minority, there is an increasing number of women, who are beginning to constitute a critical mass. There are initial trends that suggest that Congresswomen are more likely to put emphasis on health, education and social development issues. What are the more general indications?

Shaping the Sustainable Development Debate

Women tend to be more practical and more holistic and to get early warning signals. The reasons for this are many:

- Women in the South are major natural resource managers and food producers.
- Women's dual roles in the workplace and in household management give them insights into the linked aspects of environment and development, which the more unidimensional experience of men in the workplace seldom offers.
- Gender segregated roles and biological factors result in environmental changes often affecting men and women differentially.
- Women are primary health care givers and managers and thus get early warning of the health effects of environmental changes particularly on the young and aged.
- Women are major transmitters of information within the family and community.



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Particularly significant in the countries of the South, where women are conspicuously absent in positions of leadership in government, women emerged as leaders in non-governmental organisations, defining the problems of environment and development in their countries and shaping the larger debate on sustainable development. Women and women's NGOs in the South played a significant role in alerting their communities to the environmental crisis and in shaping the UNCED debate. Women's NGOs are also playing a major role in defining solutions.

As early as 1981 at the United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy in Nairobi, African women raised the alarm that their main source of energy, firewood was being seriously depleted. Some of the rural Kenyan women had walked miles to attend the conference to put their case to the leaders at the governmental conference, who were ninety nine percent male. They told of how much further they had to travel each year for water and firewood. They told of loss of biodiversity. They warned that desertification and deforestation were already looming as major crises.

The political leaders did not hear the women. The leaders had defined energy as that which was important for industry and balance of payments in the short term. The oil crisis of the mid-seventies loomed large for many nations and oil and nuclear energy were high on the agenda. There were many solar energy displays as an emerging alternative to dependence on oil. The leaders were not interested in hearing the women talk about firewood and deforestation, because they thought the energy problems as defined by the women were insignificant, 'micro level' grass roots energy issues, compared with the more immediate concerns of 'macro-level' energy policy, defined very narrowly. The leaders missed the linkages between the energy concerns of the women, the increasing scarcity of fuelwood and deforestation, desertification and lack of biodiversity to which these women were alerting the global community. They missed the environmental warning signals so clear to these women and the few of us who listened to their scientific evidence.

The women began to organise themselves as the warning signs deepened. Coincident with the shrinking natural resource base, the policies of the international financial agencies and national governments to redress balance of payments problems linked to the oil crisis, were exacerbating the trends and deepening poverty. Several national and international women's NGOs emerged.

The official UN women's conference held in the Nairobi in 1985 also stressed the growing environmental degradation. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies stressed the need for governments to improve equity for women and to buffer the consequences on women of increasing environmental degradation. The NGOs attending the conference went much further than this.

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a south-south women's NGO brought together women from Africa, Asia, Latin America the Caribbean and the Pacific. DAWN sought to make grass roots women's voices heard at the policy levels and to show the links between current development policy, increasing poverty, environmental degradation with the burden falling hardest on women. In its platform document, Development Crises and Alternative Visions launched at the NGO Forum of the 1985 United Nations End of Decade Conference on Women and Development, the need for an alternative sustainable development framework was set out clearly. The DAWN thesis posed that the world was already in crisis because our male leaders had defined development too narrowly. Human development, social development and the natural resource base and the quality of life were being eroded at the alter of economic growth, which benefitted only a priveleged few at the expense of the majority. Women and children were being hardest hit because of gender inequities. DAWN put forward recommendations for human centred development policies in which the elimination of poverty, a change in values, an end to the degradation of the environment and gender equity and justice would be primary objectives.

Women's NGOs and networks continued to organise for greater emphasis on human well-being and protection of the environment in national and global decisionmaking. In the preparations for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) it was very evident in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean that women were in the forefront. The Greenbelt movement in Africa, which involves over 80,000 women in nursely sites and replanted over 10 million trees and the Chipko movement in Asia where women hugged the trees to prevent large scale logging are some of the most renowned, but in community after community, nation after nation, we found women organising and working for a more human-centred, just and sustainable order.

Women in the North also emerged as leaders in the environmental movement for some of the same reasons, even though they were not collecting firewood. While respecting scientific knowledge, women know that there is no substitute for experience, intuition and common sense. The various spheres of understanding are therefore seen as complementary rather than as a hierarchy of knowledge systems. People who have experience in the rearing of children and in the management of households and care of the elderly, know that there are limits to logic and efficiency criteria. Logic has to be tempered by commonsense, empathy and ethics.

Women within the United Nations in collaboration with global networks of women NGOs, organised two conferences following on one another in preparation for UNCED. The World Women's Institute for Development and Environment (WORLDWIDE) in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) mobilised grass roots women who had demonstrated successful environmental management. They brought together over 200 grass roots women as well as policy makers, who were there as observers, while the women told their success stories, at the Global Assembly held in Miami, 1991.

The Women, Environment and Development Organisation, (WEDO), spearheaded by a former member of the US congress, brought together North and South women's organisations in a global network. The international planning action committee of WEDO comprised women representing every major region of the world. This committee organised the World's Women Congress for a Healthy Planet which took place in Miami November 8-12th, 1991. The Congress drew over fifteen hundred women from all over the world. The women presented their cases on major issues of sustainability including food security, biodiversity, debt and international lending agencies, population, poverty and economic policies, militarization to a tribunal of women judges. The judges drawn from actual women judges across the globe, listened to the evidence and emerged with their report in the Women's Agenda 21.

The Women's Agenda 21 established major principles, including justice and equity as the foundation for sustainability. The document identified a lack of spirituality and ethics globally, as well as distorted values, as factors shaping the present unsustainable order. It linked unequal trade, structural adjustment and debt, overconsumption, rising population and militarisation to increasing poverty and environmental degradation.

At the UNCED preparatory committee meetings, the women's caucus coordinated by the WEDO North/South coalition successfully put forward a resolution that women's issues were specific and cross-cutting. The caucus met daily to discuss strategy and shape the debate and documentation emerging on the key issues posed by UNCED on the basis on the Women's Agenda 21.

All this suggests that we may have the potential to broaden the vision and give balance to the perspectives, hence avoiding the narrow perspectives and preventing the lurching from crisis to crisis if we made women fifty percent of our leaders. Generally, women are more likely to approach the challenge of sustainable development from a holistic perspective linking human development, the elimination of poverty and stressing sustainable livelihoods. Gender and environmental issues are more likely to fully integrated into research, planning and policy. They are likely to put greater emphasis on spiritual development and ethical values with more emphasis on human dignity and rights of minorities.

In national bureaucracies there will be emphasis on multidisciplinary and intersectoral planning. Gender and environmental specialists will be members of each department. There is likely to be a stress on greater transparency, accountability and democracy in our organisations and affairs of state.

In education they are likely to stress ethics and values and give more legitimacy to the knowledge of women and local communities. They are also likely to give greater emphasis to fostering cooperation. Increasing women's access to education and

strengthening the human, gender related and ethical content of all subjects with special emphasis on areas such as science and technology, business management and law would be important objectives. This would have the impact of making these disciplines more attractive to girls.

In health there is more likely to be an emphasis on prevention rather than curative medicine and a greater respect for traditional healing methods and knowledge systems. There is also more likely to be emphasis on whole health, spiritual, mental and physical. This is also likely to be the case in veterinary medicine, where the links between animal and human diseases are also more likely to be emphasized. Improving the general quality of life is more likely to be stressed as an important national health objective.

In population policy a balanced leadership is less likely to target women's bodies as experimental units and more likely to accept the clear evidence that improving women's education and their status while reducing infant mortality are the most effective routes to reducing population levels. The policy is thus likely to emphasize those areas as well as improving reproductive health and women's access to safe reproductive technologies.

Economic and financial policy will give as much emphasis to employment and equity as indicators of national economic well being as inflation and balance of payments. The sale of harmful drugs will not be counted as part of the national income statistics, but would be counted as a debit. The contribution of household work and voluntary labour will be recognised as central to the economic and financial well-being of the state. National income statistics and economic and social policy will reflect this. There will be a greater understanding of the distinction between value and price. In industry there is likely to be greater accountability and transparency required with a stronger environmental focus. There is likely to be greater sensitivity to the needs of women and their families, including child care facilities particularly for women workers.

In trade agreements such as NAFTA, there would be negotiation on industries providing environmental safety guarantees and humane conditions for workers. Occupational health issues would be paramount. Child care facilities for women working would also be significant to any negotiation. The health and welfare implications of women working twelve hour shifts from 7pm-7am without child care would be obvious to a gender balanced team of negotiators.

Security and foreign policy would stress social development, poverty elimination, cooperation and negotiation as the primary route to security, rather than an emphasis on militarization. Development assistance is likely to be genuinely designed as assistance to those with greatest need rather than a covert mechanism to increase short term trade. The long term pay back of genuinely helping other countries to be self-sufficient is more likely to be recognised.

International financial organisations particularly the World Bank and IMF would be made more democratic, more transparent and accountable. Social development, gender and environmental specialists would be integrated into every section of the agencies with focal points at the corporate level. All program planning and country visits would be conducted by multidisciplinary teams. Macro economic policies would be shaped to favour balanced local development. Countries would be encouraged to put emphasis on domestic food security as an important foundation for sustainable development.

The United Nations would allocate more resources to their social development agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO and UNDP. WHO would put more emphasis on promoting basic health care and environmental health in nations of the south and rural areas. Provision of adequate potable water supplies and proper disposal of waste would be promoted as priority health issues. Aid to southern countries would assist countries and communities giving priority to these policy areas. Representatives of civil society would be actively involved in the United Nations decisionmaking processes. NGO representatives would be part of each national delegation, which would be required to reflect gender balance.

If women comprised fifty percent of our leaders, human centred, sustainable development and an improved quality of life globally, underpinned by ethical considerations, would be a realistic goal.

Rosina Wiltshire
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